



Let Your Motto Be Resistance: African American Portraits

Grades 9-12

This lesson can be used in a unit on the Civil Rights Movement or as a part of a Character Education unit focusing on discrimination and stereotyping. It is a modified version of a lesson developed for an exhibition organized by the [International Center for Photography](#) in conjunction with the [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#). The exhibition features works drawn exclusively from the collections of the [National Portrait Gallery](#).

Learning Standards

U. S. History 5–12 (from the National Center for History in the Schools)

- Era 9 Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)
Standard 4 The struggle for racial and gender equality and the extension of civil liberties

Language Arts K–12 (from the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association)

- Standard 2 Understanding the Human Experience
Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
- Standard 4 Communication Skills
Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- Standard 8 Developing Research Skills
Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
- Standard 12 Applying Language Skills
Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Objectives

- Students will examine images in a guided looking activity to make inferences about portrait subjects.
- Students will learn about the contributions of African Americans in the twentieth century.

Duration

Two 45- to 60-minute class periods, plus homework

Materials

- Large portrait of teacher's choice for think-aloud demonstration (Part II, Step 2)
- Copies of portraits (Reproducibles)

For Part II

- Large paper (approximately 11" x 17")

- Scissors
- Glue
- Entertainment magazines or entertainment sections of newspapers

Reproducibles

- *Ella Fitzgerald*, 1954, by Lisette Model ([click here](#))
- *Wynton Marsalis*, 2004, by Philippe Levy-Staub ([click here](#))
- *Odette*, 1930, by Bob Willoughby ([click here](#))
- *Leontyne Price*, 1953, by Carl Van Vechten ([click here](#))

Background Information

On August 16, 1843, abolitionist and clergyman Henry Highland Garnet spoke to a group of northern free blacks gathered to discuss the future prospects of black America.

Frustrated by the lack of progress, he advocated action with these words:

Strike for your lives and liberties. . . . Let your motto be Resistance! Resistance! RESISTANCE! . . . What kind of resistance you . . . make you must decide by the circumstances that surround you.

In their beauty and power, the featured portraits resist the stereotypic depictions that fueled racism in America.

Directions

Part I Stereotypes discussion

1. Ask students to brainstorm what they know about the word "stereotype." This may be done in a large group (teacher directed) or in small groups that report to the large group. Create a common definition.
Teacher Information: The word "stereotype" originally referred to a metal printing plate from which copies could be made with no changes. This became a metaphor for a set of unchanging ideas, especially about a group of people. (Retrieved from <http://www.sacsc.ca/upload/pdf/Examining%20Stereotypes.pdf>)Media Awareness Network article about stereotyping in the media
<http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/index.cfm>
and a "tip sheet" for discussion stereotypes with students
http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/tip_sheets/racial_tip.cfm
2. Divide the class into small groups. Ask each group to develop a list of the prevailing stereotypes of black musicians today. Ask students to name a broad range of musicians and think about how some seem to defy the stereotypes and others seem to fit them. One student will report back to the class about the stereotypes identified in his or her group and which musicians exemplify or defy these stereotypes.
3. Homework: In preparation for the next class, have each student bring in one photograph of a contemporary African American musician.

Part II Discussion about portraiture

1. Ask students to define the word portrait and lead them to a definition that includes the following: *The representation of a person in a work of art, which is usually meant to capture essential or important qualities.* Important things to consider when examining a portrait include: pose, facial expression, clothing, setting (objects and area surrounding the person in the portrait), activity of the person, and how (or if) these visual facts create a mood or intangible quality for the image.
2. Using a portrait of your choice, do a "think aloud" for your students in which you address the aspects of a portrait outlined above.
3. Divide the class into small groups. Using the images of contemporary African American musicians that students have brought to class, each group will identify how each image fits or defies the stereotypes identified in the discussion. Have

one student from each group report on at least one of the images.

4. Give each group one of the portraits provided in this lesson and identify the subjects (Ella Fitzgerald, Odetta, Wynton Marsalis, and Leontyne Price). Inform the students that they are all musicians, but do not provide any further information about their lives or careers. Using the techniques for evaluating a portrait demonstrated in Step 2 above, have the groups examine their assigned portrait and make at least three hypotheses about the subject. Ask one person from each group to report back to the class.

Part III Final project

1. Have each student select one contemporary musician and any one of the four artists featured in this lesson and conduct research on their lives and careers. How does the biographical information support or refute the hypotheses they made about the portrait subjects?
2. Have students place the portraits they have selected side-by-side on a sheet of paper (no smaller than 11" x 17") that will accommodate both images and leave at least three inches of space surrounding each image. Ask them to place facts, short phrases, quotes and descriptive words (words drawn from what can be *seen*) around each image. In the space between the images, students should list the characteristics the individuals have in common.
3. Display the students' posters.

Information for the Teacher

About the Portraits

Ella Fitzgerald 1917–1976

In the mid-1930s, Ella Fitzgerald entered a Harlem talent contest intending to do a dance. On stage, however, her legs froze, and in desperation she launched into song. Her fallback alternative proved good enough to win the contest, and so began a singing career that would make Fitzgerald the "First Lady of Song." Blessed with a voice capable of seamlessly spanning three octaves, Fitzgerald soon perfected her remarkable gifts for vocal improvisation, known as "scat" singing. Her "songbook" recordings of American standards, made from 1956 to 1964, are the definitive tributes to Cole Porter, Duke Ellington, Rodgers and Hart, and other composers. Fitzgerald's respectful understanding of the intentions of the compositions made these songwriters some of her most ardent fans. "I never knew how good our songs were," lyricist Ira Gershwin once said, "until I heard Ella Fitzgerald sing them."

Wynton Marsalis b. 1961

Marsalis is arguably the most accomplished jazz musician of his generation. Born into a musical family in New Orleans, he studied both jazz and classical music. Since moving to New York in 1979—to attend the Juilliard School of Music—Marsalis has built an international reputation as a jazz trumpeter, winning nine Grammy Awards. In 1997 he became the first jazz musician to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize, for *Blood on the Fields*, an oratorio about the experiences of two free Africans who are captured and sold into slavery. In addition to studying the roots of jazz, he has nurtured collaborations with those working in a variety of musical traditions, including classical and non-Western. Marsalis now serves as the artistic director of jazz at Lincoln Center and has emerged as a leading—and often outspoken—voice regarding jazz's past, present, and future.

Odetta b. 1930-2008

Since the early 1950s, Odetta has been recognized as one of folk music's most compelling interpreters. Introduced to this musical genre just as the folk revival was gaining momentum, she wholeheartedly embraced the ballads, work songs, blues, and spirituals that so vividly evoked the experiences of generations of African Americans. Her powerful voice and distinctive guitar playing soon earned her an enthusiastic following that included performers Pete Seeger and Harry Belafonte, who helped to champion her career. The growth of the civil rights movement coincided with Odetta's rising popularity, and as her political engagement grew, her songs became weapons in the struggle for justice. "As I was singing, I was one of those things that was smoldering," Odetta later recalled. In 1963 she joined the March on Washington and rallied the crowd with her

moving rendition of the spiritual "Oh Freedom."

Leontyne Price b. 1927

Soprano Leontyne Price was the first African American opera singer to achieve stardom at home and on the international stage. Following vocal studies at the Juilliard School, she earned glowing reviews in 1952 for her performance as Bess in a popular revival of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. She went on to star in NBC's 1955 production of Giuseppe Verdi's *Tosca*, becoming the first black singer to appear in an opera telecast. Her career steadily gained momentum with acclaimed performances in opera houses from San Francisco to Milan. In 1961, when she made her Metropolitan Opera debut as Leonora in Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, Price received a thunderous, forty-two minute ovation. For years she remained one of the Met's brightest stars and one of the opera world's most admired performers.

For additional teaching resources visit www.SmithsonianEducation.org

TM ® & © 2011-1996 Scholastic Inc. All Rights Reserved.